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Interview Transcript

Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati

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Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.,

at The Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati, 2007

The Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati officially opened in November of 1995. But the roots of the people who come here to worship really began in the late 60s. I mean, from the time my parents came to Cincinnati, worshipping in people's homes, to a mosque converted from a home in Clifton and then a larger home in Clifton. The center was always a dream of the Muslims in the Greater Cincinnati area. And so, it took about seven years of planning, with two years of that in actual construction before the center was opened. And it was initiated and really led by members of the community that had lived here for decades.

This location, a particular 18-acre spot, was picked for two reasons: it was accessible from the highway, and at that time, it was economical. I mean, we didn't expect a Wal-Mart for a neighbor or Meijer's across the street but the area has changed tremendously since the land was acquired in the late 1980s.

The people who come to worship at the Islamic Center are quite diverse. They're almost as colorful, as you may have seen, as the flags that are draping the reflecting pond at the entrance to the center in the sense that they're from anywhere from the good old USA to Africa to Europe to Asia to Indonesia. And so we really get kind of a United Nations in here on Fridays. Many of them have been here for generations and generations, and many of them are much more recent, whether they be immigrants or people who are here to study, you know, as students or for further academic studies of other sorts.

The congregation draws from throughout Greater Cincinnati, which is nearly 25,000, but we have about, I'd say, a thousand people that come here on a regular or semi-regular basis. So we have about 300 families that are, you know, pretty committed to the center on a regular basis. But then, we get 3,000 people on the two holiday prayers.

The center was built by initiatives of the community, but the physical structure really would not have happened without the involvement of Mid-American Development Company headed by Mr. Ahmed Samawi to whom the original design was taken. He committed to building the center for the money that the community had raised and putting the rest forth of his own fortune and dedicated pretty much the last seven years of his life to making this one of the most unique mosques and Islamic centers in the Northern hemisphere.

This Islamic Center is a wonderful blend of the Eastern mosques, you know, which are hundreds and hundreds of years old, yet in a way very light and modern. The original design was conceived by the help of an Egyptian-born architect who lives and works in Paris, Ramzi Mahallawi. And then that was taken by the local community leaders to Mid-American Development Company and a local architectural firm named Gerry Foote & Associates, and then was suited to the land that we had acquired. And the two architectural designs that the center is based on are taken from the Umayyad period, which is based out of Damascus, Syria as we know it today. But roughly 1200 years ago, the Umayyad Dynasty was in rule. And then the other period is the Moorish architectural period, and the Moorish were from Islamic Spain, a period of 700 years when Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in harmony and made great contributions to art, architecture and literature. Gerry Foot even traveled to Syria with Mr. Samawi to really understand the full ambiance and architectural background of the Umayyad Dynasty and those architectural elements that were incorporated into dome and the colors of the beautiful gold floral paint that's used on the metal domes. The crescent, the way that it's tiered on the triple gold balls on top of the domes are very much an Umayyad architectural element. The chandelier that you see behind me was designed and crafted in Syria and came here in little boxes and was put together here and is very reminiscent of the Umayyad architectural period. Some of the calligraphy that you would have seen, particularly in the atrium where we have gold, copper and silver inlay on top of brass highlighting some of the passages from the Qur'an or taken from Umayyad elements as well.

From the Moorish architectural periods, I think the beautiful colors that you see in the rugs, many of the geometric shapes that you see, particularly the eight-cornered star that you see doesn't have a religious significance but it's a very much an element recognizable from the Moorish architectural period and you'll see that in libraries, museums, churches, even possibly synagogues.

The domes very much today are a part of a mosque; a mosque is a wide open space where people can gather to say congregational prayer together. It's a place of submitting to God. And so the dome was actually borrowed from the Byzantine period in order to cover the wide open space which is essentially what a mosque provides. Some of the very early mosques were actually open-aired, but as Islam traveled throughout the world, the dome became a necessity. So, the particular style of the dome and the color is taken from the Umayyad period. The other outside elements that give it a Middle Eastern ambiance is the specially fabricated pre-cast stone that was created to give it a Middle Eastern ambiance but in a color which is very light and modern and contemporary. The walkways that separate the different buildings are more of a, I would say, Moorish architectural period element. The walkways connect the different main structures on the campus: the mosque, which is where we're standing right now, which is the focal point, the center of the facility, the reason why the rest of the facility is here, the place of worship, to the educational building which is the place of learning or cultural center which is the center building, and then that is also connected via the walkways to the community center or the recreational facility and physically attached to that is our full-time school which has, includes an Islamic curriculum, which is independent from the center. All of those combined, if you'll look between the mosque and the educational building, are focused around a courtyard with a fountain; the courtyard is an element taken from the very early mosques from the time of the prophet on. The courtyard symbolizes that it's a place of gathering, not just for worship but for family, for play, for finding out the health of your neighbors, for making important community decisions.

A fountain or a well was always an essential element of those early mosques. Ninety to ninety-five percent of everything in the mosque is from the good old Midwest. There were elements that were brought in from other places of the world and the fountains and the mosaics were two of those key elements. The fountains are very important elements not just because they add beauty and serenity as a result of the sound of the water, but water has been an essential part of a mosque for the purposes of wudhu or ablution or washing oneself and being clean before you come in to pray. So even though the decorative marble fountains on the inside as well as the outside are more for aesthetic purposes, we do have, of course, a wudhu, or a running water ablutionary, where people can wash before they come in to pray.

The crescent, which is quite often associated with the religion of Islam, is actually not a religious symbol. It's much more of a historical symbol reminding us of the fact that the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar so we look for the shape of the thin crescent that signifies the beginning of a new month so we know, for example, that Ramadan is beginning, which is the month of fasting, or that Hajj will be in 10 days, which is the last month of the lunar calendar, Dhu'l-Hijja. Actually, the crescent was a symbol that was developed by the Ottoman Empire. It is utilized to remind us of Islam and it is also utilized in different aspects of the mosque to let people know that this is a mosque, a place of worship for Muslims to come and pray.

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar. It does have 12 months and certain months have a particular significance in the sense that Ramadan is the month of fasting. So for those 29 or 30 days, Muslims who are adult, healthy, capable, not sick, old enough, would get up and have a major meal in the morning, say their morning prayer and no eating, drinking, intimate relationships during the daylight hours and then break their fast at sunset. Ramadan is very significant to this belief to be when the Qur'an was revealed. Dhu'l-Hijja is the last month of the Islamic calendar which comes two months and 10 days after. Ramadan is the 9th month and that is the time in which the annual pilgrimage or Hajj takes place which is obligated on Muslims at least once in their lifetime if they're physically and financially able to do so. It is important to remember that the 12 lunar months and thus the whole calendar is about 10 or, 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar that we follow and so Ramadan or Hajj would come 10, or 11 days earlier every year as a result of that shorter lunar calendar.

When you come inside the mosque, the place of prayer, the congregational prayer hall in particular, you notice the absence of any statues, any life imagery, any human pictures, any depictions of that sort; those are purposefully missing in order, not to have anything that could be misconstrued as representing God. So, you ask, "Well, how do we know God?" Well, we know God by all of God's creations, all of us, and everything around us and then we also know God by the works of God which are in the Qur'an. So, the various forms of calligraphy that you see, written in different artistic styles throughout the mosque, are words of God taken from the Qur'an and then written in various beautiful methods and various calligraphy styles in order to both beautify the mosque and to remind us of the words

of God. There're very few things that are required in the mosque per se but what is utilized are geometric shapes and florals in lieu of the images and the life images in order to both beautify and to make it pleasing to the eye.

The chandelier is obviously something, particularly to the school kids that come here for tours. It's the first thing that they notice and are oohed and aahed by. It obviously provides light to the wide open space and it also is a beautiful element that reminds of the Umayyad architectural periods. It was designed and crafted in Syria. It's especially fabricated of a lighter material than even crystal and even then it weighs over two tons. It is 21 feet wide and 28 feet high. I think it competes for probably the largest chandelier in Cincinnati and adds a beautiful element to the gold-painted dome which is in a gold crackle finish typically used in fine furnishings as well.

The mosque, as well as the other buildings in the Islamic Center, have 500 different panes of leaded glass or stained glass. All of the leaded glass and stained glass was created in Middletown, Ohio by Beau Verre Studios. The concept was to allow natural light into the worship space while at the same time, to beautify in a way where you are not using life images or human forms in any way so you see the various geometric shapes and florals and then the colors that are consistent with the Umayyad period and the Moorish period. The window above the fountain in the atrium, at the entrance, is 14 feet wide and 50 feet in length. The corner windows on each of the corners of the worship space itself are 24 feet in height and many of them utilize similar geometrics, and shapes and patterns, again, reminiscent of the Umayyad and the Moorish periods.

When you come into the mosque and the worship area in particular, your eyes are automatically drawn to the mihrab, the prayer niche, which is at the front of the congregational prayer area. The mihrab is a mosaic that was brought in from Syria and it is there to depict the direction in which Muslims pray when we come inside. So even if you come in by yourself - the mosque is open for five daily prayers - you know which direction to face even if you've never been here before. And that direction is facing toward the KabbaKabah, the first house of God, built by Prophet Abraham and his son Prophet Ishmael, which is in Mecca, Saudi Arabia as we know it today. If you look, you notice that the mihrab is not facing directly East but it's facing North-Northeast; the reason for that is that we take the shortest path to the KabbaKabah. We know the world is not flat anymore and so we go over the North Pole to point towards the KabbaKabah.

The balcony to the right of the mihrab is called a minbar and that balcony is taken from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to whom the Qur'an was revealed; he was the first imam, the first leader of prayer. He would deliver the khutba or the sermon from a raised platform, essentially to allow people to see him and to hear him. The minbar is a tradition in pretty much all mosques so the imam or the prayer leader is able to stand there and to deliver the khutba so he can be heard and be seen. In the mosque here at the Ahmed Samawi Mosque, which was rededicated for Mr. Samawi, the gentleman who built and headed Mid-American Development Company, the balcony on the left was added really more for an architectural symbol and to provide symmetry. It is not used in any way, shape, or form.

The mihrab: if you go and stand facing towards the KabbaKabah, you notice that you don't need a microphone. The way that it is designed and the way that the dome and this physical space is designed, the voice of the imam projects really quite nicely.

One of the other things that you immediately notice are the beautiful handmade rugs that you see throughout the worship space and those rugs are really, again, not here for any religious significance, but they're here for aesthetic purposes. They were donated by different people and they truly are from all over the world; from Iran, for the Persian rugs, to Pakistan, to Egypt, to even some Bulgarian rugs. They provide both beauty and they provide comfort because as you see, we have 5,000 square feet of carpeting but sometimes for those people who sit on the carpeting to listen to the khutba or just come and read the Qur'an, those handmade carpets add another level of comfort as well.

One of the things in Islam which is an essential part of our faith is modesty: modesty in the way that men and women dress as well as modesty in the way that they carry themselves and behave. And so even our guests, when they come to visit, we ask them to respect the place that they're coming to visit and dress in slacks or long skirts, bring a scarf because the scholars interpret the scarf as a part of modesty in dress. But it is important to understand that the mosque is open to men and women and even at the time of the prophet, men and women did pray together. But it is also important to remember that for reasons of modesty and focus, men and women don't pray intermingled and the reason is that, as you observe people in prayer, when we're praying there's a standing, there's a kneeling, a bending over, and there's actually a bowing or a prostrating where you're submitting before God and your forehead touches the carpet. As a woman, I don't want a strange man standing behind me. So we have designed the

mezzanine, or the balcony level, which is reserved exclusively for the ladies. The ladies are free to come up here and know that there are not going to be any men behind them. There's no reason they can't be on the first floor but generally, they would be towards one side where, again, the men are not walking behind them while they're in prayer. So men and women pray together but they don't pray intermingled.

Women in Islam really could be a topic on its own and I think it's an important one because women play a tremendously important role while they're on this Earth. They were created equal in the eyes of God. We don't believe in preordained sin but in the sense that Adam and Eve sinned but they both asked for forgiveness and they were both equally forgiven. So we're all born pure and innocent in a state of submission to God. We have, as women, the same responsibilities to follow God's will in the way that we live and practice our faith. We also have specific roles that are designated for one versus the other that take precedence over other things and the most important role for women is that of mother. There's tremendous respect that's given to women as a result of that role. There are passages that testify to that and there are sayings of the prophet that say "Heaven lies underneath the feet of the mother," and that "The best amongst you is the one who's kindest to his wife and his family." That role, being the most important, does not limit us. Women have the right to get an education. The prophet said "Women and men are obligated to gain knowledge from the cradle to the grave." So all of us are obligated to seek knowledge. And if you educate a woman, you educate another generation because our number one responsibility is to rear and educate the children.

Women have the right to be respected. It's very important for us to understand that women in Islam were given rights 1400 years ago, such as the right to own property, to inheritance, to be a guardian for children, the right to an education "From the cradle to the grave" as the prophet said, the right to be a businesswoman. His first wife, Khadijah, was a businesswoman in her own right and he actually worked for her in his younger days. And today, quite often, we mis-associate Islam with the lack of those rights in countries that may be predominantly Muslim and the problem is not that Islam doesn't grant those rights, but it's because of lack of education; where the literacy rate is the lowest, the problem is the highest. Or the fact that cultural and tribal traditions quite often tend to prevail over religious teachings of Islam.

Part of the Islamic Center and pretty much all mosques is the presence of a minaret. It can be one, two, four, or in one unique case, up to eight minarets. The minaret, though functional in the olden countries, where somebody climbs to the top of the minaret for the Adhan or the call for prayer, "Allah u Akbar, Allah u Akbar," here, it's more of a symbol or an icon. And though we have loud speakers outside, West Chester doesn't want to be called to prayer five times a day, so the Adhan or the call for prayer is said from inside the mosque and people are given a few moments to gather for the congregational prayer. But the minaret does allow people to recognize this as a place of worship for Muslims and we've had people pull off of the highway to come and offer their prayer before they get back on I-75.

The minaret as well as the overall design of the mosque and the unique physical structure allows for it to really catch people's attention and so people have a lot of curiosity about what kind of a place is this. Is this a palace? Is it a museum? Is it a place of worship? The minaret and the crescent allow quite a few people to know that it is a mosque and we also have a lot of Muslims or non-Muslims who are very curious about the facility. The Islamic Center has a very open door policy in the sense that we welcome people, our neighbors, Americans of all faiths, to come and to visit the center and to be able to get a guided tour and to experience the facility, to learn about Islam and to meet their American Muslim neighbors. And so, we offer guided tours of the facility and we have about 5,000 to 6,000 people a year that take advantage of the guided tours.

The Dome, one of the unique recognizable architectural symbols, again, taken from the Omayyad Dynasty, is metal, painted in a gold floral paint to retain that golden luster reminiscent of the Omayyad Period. The circumference of the Dome is 300 feet and the inside circumference, as you may have seen, has the glass and gold mirror plates, each of which represents one of the attributes of God. We know God by the word "Allah," which just means "One God" in Arabic, but we also know him by "The Almighty," "The All-powerful," "The Life-giving," "The Life-taking" and so those are in the black and gold mirror plates that you see around the circumference of the Dome. The Dome itself on the interior is painted in a crackle finish typically used on fine furnishings. The east wall and the worship space has an embroidery which was acquired from Mecca, Saudi Arabia and it has embroidered on it the 99 names of God or the Attributes of Perfection as they are also known.

As we talked about, there are no statues, there's no life imagery, so calligraphy is used to beautify the mosque and to remind us of the words of God. There're probably two dozen different types of calligraphy in the mosque

itself, in the Masjid or the worship space. And right in front of us, on top of the mihrab is Kufic calligraphy, the straight black and white lines is a unique style of calligraphy. And then if you look to the pillar above, on the right of the mihrab, there's "Allah," which means "One God," written there. It's also written in a more traditional style of calligraphy on top of the minbar or the balcony to the right and then if you follow your eyes to the 24-foot stained glass window, towards the upper-end you see the eight-corner star taken from the Moorish period and etched inside of them is "Allah" in such a way where you can read it from the inside as well as the outside. So right there, there are three different styles of calligraphy focusing on just that one word which means "One God".

The interior walls of the Congregational Prayer Area are all hand-painted. And they're, again, consistent with the colors of the Omayyad and the Moorish period, but they're done in some ways in a very modern style by a local artist by the name of Gary Lord.

From the time that my parents came and I as a very, very young child in the late 60's, to now, the congregation that I know of has grown from what I could count as families on one hand to hundreds of families that come regularly and thousands of families that are in the greater Cincinnati area and the demographics of those families has also changed in the sense that, many of them are of South Asian descent or perhaps, a quarter maybe of Middle Eastern descent, but then over a third are African American as is the Muslim population of roughly 7 million in the United States. A growing number of 10 percent or 20 percent are Caucasian or European descent. We have a growing Hispanic population. There are people from the Eastern European countries such as Bosnia, Chechnia, those places, which, we didn't even know about back in the 70's. So the demographics have changed, the community has most certainly grown tremendously. And I think it's added a wonderful dimension in the sense that it gives all of our children an opportunity to realize that we don't live on an island and that there are lots of different people in the world. We also have something beautiful that we can learn from, and so I really have valued the opportunity to allow my children that experience and we look forward to sharing that diversity and the beauty of the different colors of people and dress and languages that come here with the Greater Cincinnati Community as well.

You know Islam in America is really not new as some people might think. At the time of Columbus, many of the navigators, including ones that travelled with Columbus, were of Muslim heritage. Recent studies have shown that at least 30% of the Africans that were brought to the Americas as part of the slave trade were Muslim and they like everyone else lost their religion at that time. But the roots of Islam in America go hundreds of years back. As far as Cincinnati, obviously it's much more recent. Just in my lifetime, I remember going from a handful of families shivering in people's homes, to having the generosity of Saint Monica / Saint George renting or loaning their community hall for Muslims to gather and offer the holiday prayer, or praying at a borrowed room at a hospital where somebody was doing residency and then the first Mosque was acquired, I believe, an old home in 1972 across from Saint Monica / Saint George on Fairview, and in the very early 80's, the Mosque in Clifton was purchased and grown recently and then of course the Islamic Center here in West Chester, Ohio.

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